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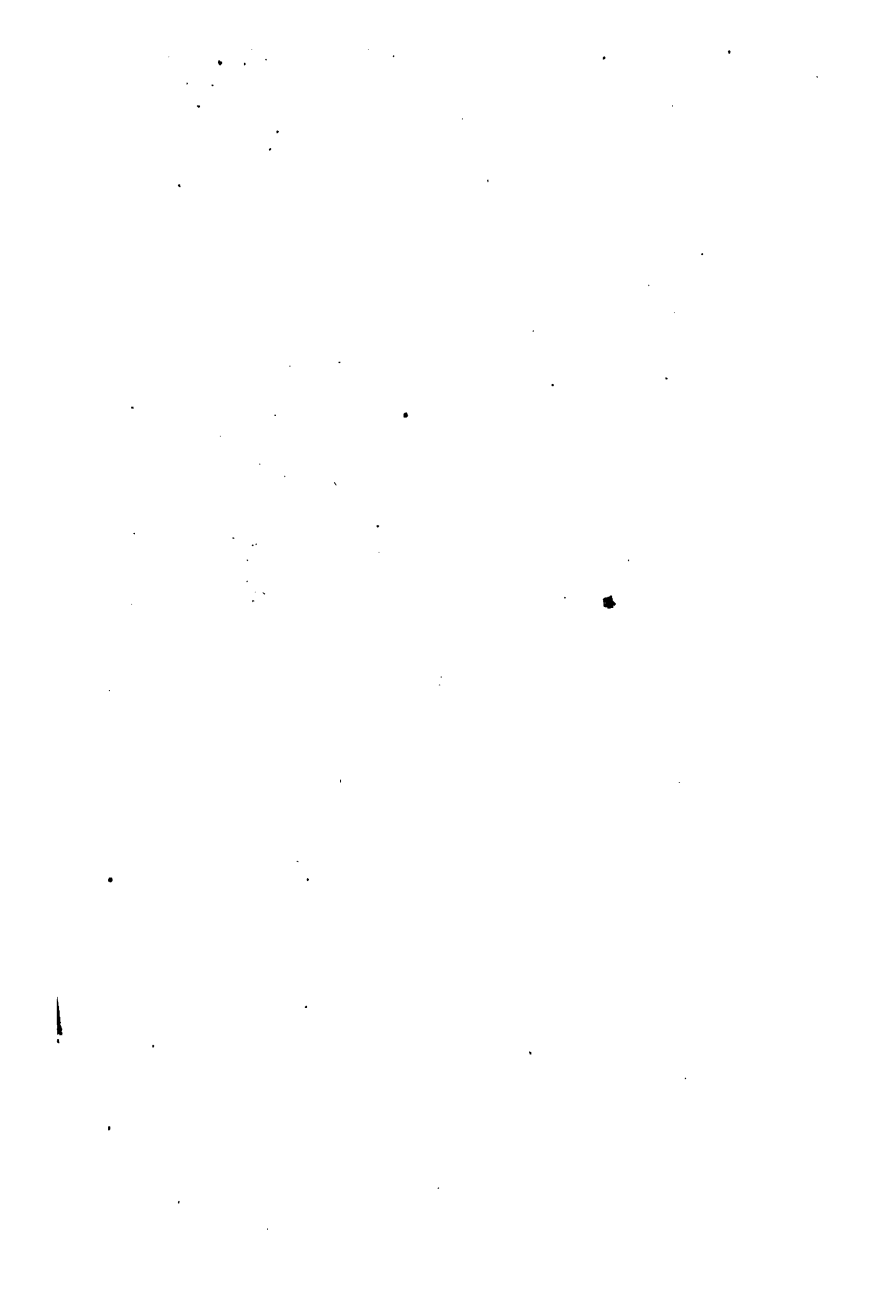
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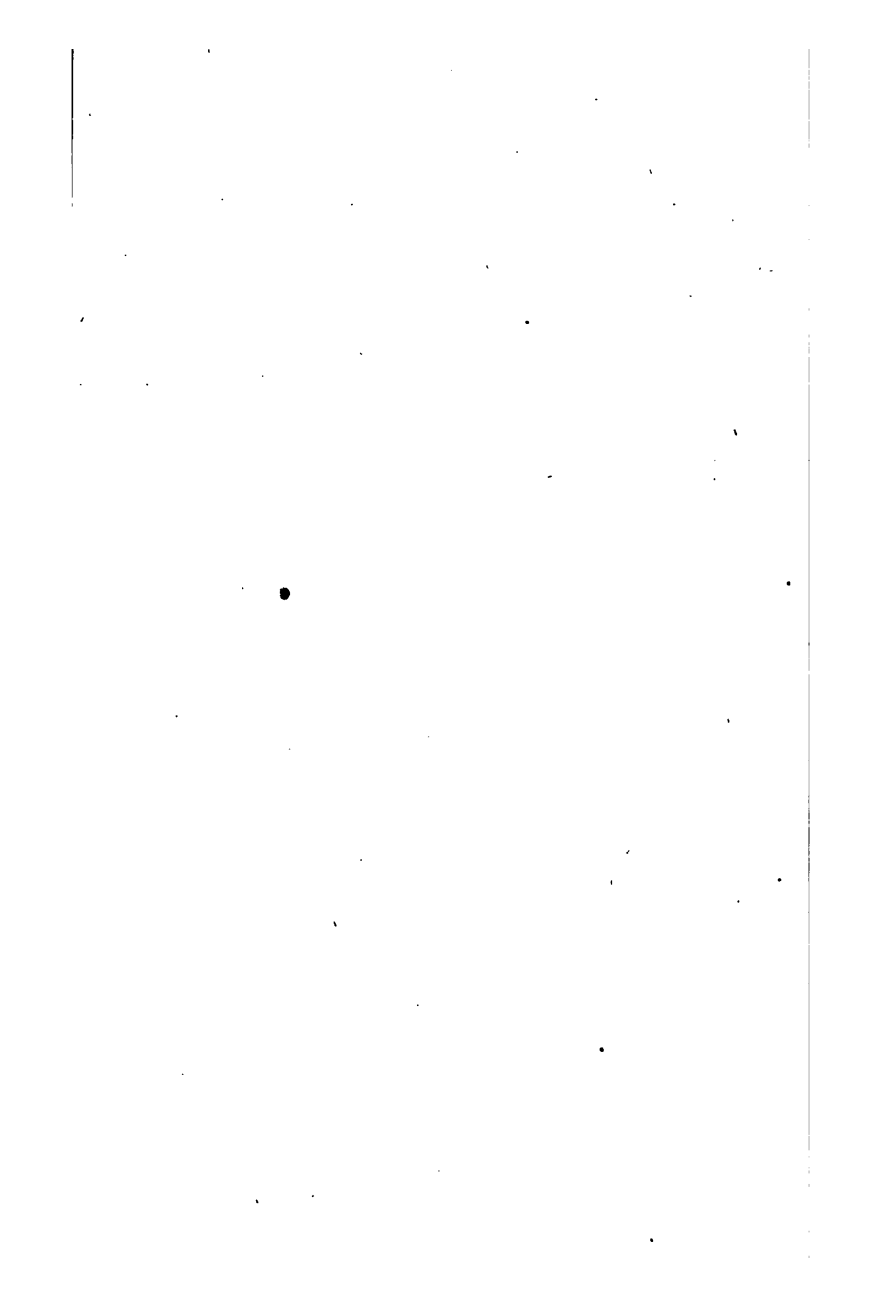
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THE
YOUNG POET'S ASSISTANT.

A FEW HINTS
ON THE
COMPOSITION OF POETRY.

BY
AN OLD REVIEWER.



LONDON
SAUNDERS AND OTLEY, CONDUIT STREET.
1854.

270. c. 257.

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THE YOUNG POET'S ASSISTANT.

How should Poetry be written, and what are the qualifications which Poetical Writers should seek, to render their productions successful?

The importance of this question increases as we reflect upon it, and the longer we do so, the more does its field enlarge.

What is meant by this phrase 'successful?' we answer, that glad acceptance of the Poet's strains which amounts to popularity in his own day, and that grasp of truth and congeniality of feeling which often leads posterity to confirm the verdict first recorded, thus deepening present favour into future fame.

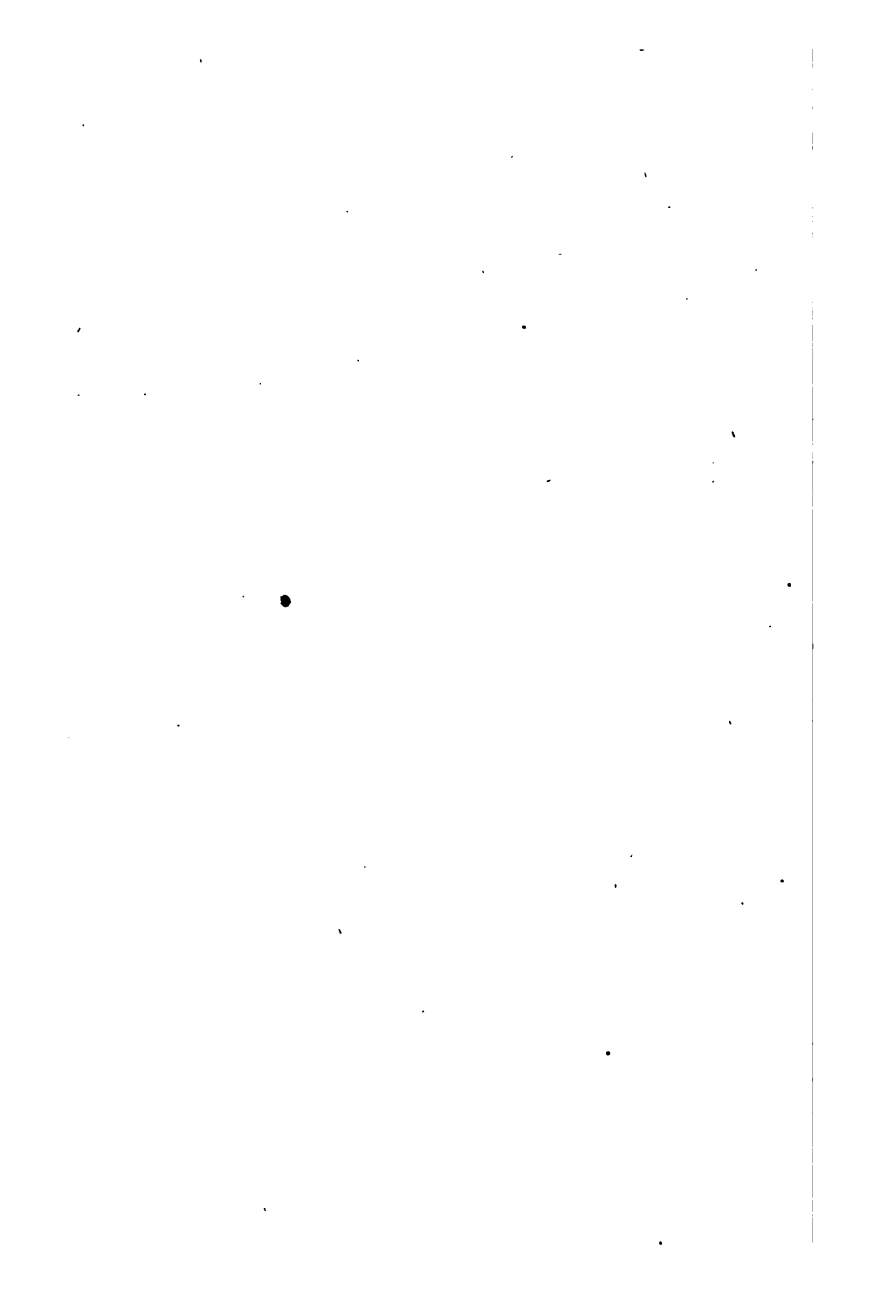
In endeavouring to answer the important question here indicated, it will not be necessary to trace the History of Poetry from the earlier ages, because the ever varying aspect of human affairs, continually tends to render that obsolete which was once admired, and that common which was once considered remarkable and extraordinary. Society, like individuals, has its "seven ages." The Poetry of its infancy is not the Poetry of its manhood. The lullaby of its cradle is not the majestic epic of its mature existence. Thus it follows that Poetry uniformly changes in its character with the age in which it is written. It progresses as society progresses. This is no where more felt than in reading the various Collections of our Poets, where we meet with many descriptions of life and manners which have scarcely any resemblance to those of our present observation or past experience.

Nevertheless, while modes and manners change as society advances in refinement, human nature is still the same as in the first

generation of man's existence, his passions being identical; and thus every trait of genuine nature, breaking through the crude formations of half barbaric times, finds an instant response, although surrounded by obsolete constructions.

These instincts of the life within us are the freemasonry of the Poet in every age. This is the true electric current which vitalizes the world; for be it remembered, all who receive the Poet's thoughts are touched with his fire. The individual who has never indited a single line of verse, having within him the capability of responding to the power of the moving principle, is himself in his degree most truly invested with the spirit of brotherhood; were it not so, for whom would Poets write?

There are, however, certain integral qualities belonging to Poetical composition, which are common to every age; the vivid conception and delineation of which must at all times be regarded as essential to true Poetry. These know neither decay nor



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the fears, the hopes, of a people, he wields a correspondent power over their tendencies. The chords of human nature answer to his touch, whether he jar the strings or wake them to harmonious music. He can stimulate the passions to rebellion, or soothe them into pleasurable obedience. Let him look well at his own vast responsibility.

As the world progresses, every age leaves on its great archives the record of its own advance or retrogression. The Poetry of every century registers the refinement and intellect of its individual era. This may be said of literature generally, but of Poetry in particular, since we recognise in verse the highest order of literature. It is the produce of the field that proves of what the soil may be composed. Thus the Poets of every age leave behind them the measuring gauge of the purity of spirit marking their own generation.

It is true that there are stages in the existence of a nation in which Poetry is all but banished from the walks of life. Harder

concerns may for a time seem to Macadamize the roads in which the fragile flowers of the Poet's fancy were wont to blossom, and the storms of adversity, in the shapes of war and pestilence, may gather over its horizon, excluding all the inspiring beams of the Poetic heaven, but these phases are as sure to pass away as the natural sun to shine again after the direst tempest, and the earth to blossom beneath the life-restoring beams.

Poetry can never become extinct. It possesses an undying spirit, and must revive after every depression, whatever be the condition of the world. It is associated with the love of the beautiful and the true. It paints the visible, and realizes the imaginative. It shows us the moral grandeur of *truth*, and presents us with religious conceptions of Divine *truth*. Its field is so extensive, that while it paints the most minute of the fairy cups that blossom on the earth, it can soar at pleasure among suns and stars.

It is an evil thing for any age or country to be deaf to the melody of soul-inspiring

song. All that is great and good must pine away in those seasons of disease. All is declension, and must remain so until some throb of awakening nature call the good angel back to watch the mortal life.

Power is the great ambition of the human heart. It is the one possession that involves the heaviest of human responsibilities. The Poet possesses this power to an almost unlimited extent. It becomes a question of both national and moral interest, how he may use it most worthily.

Whatever the superstructure of the Poet's fancy, certain principles ought fixedly ever to remain at their foundation. Poetry being a bright spirit of celestial birth, sent upon earth to ennoble man by her teaching and companionship, there is shame and woe for him who would cast a speck or a stain on the purity of her white robe. Wit is a sort of vagrant, often winning his choicest triumphs, like other victories, at a ruinous cost. Too frequently his best *hits* are his greatest infamies; his most alert stabs are stabs at

truth. For the sake of some *sharp play* upon words the very decencies of social life are violated. Yet wit is so prized by its possessor, that the worst levities are often suffered to escape the pen under its supposititious parentage. Let the Poet beware. These distortions of truth are usually the mere painted flames and not the vital presence. The Poet is only inditing his own arraignment. If his productions have in them the elements of longevity, he is only placing himself at the bar of future ages to receive reiterated condemnation. It is wonderful how men possessing taste, tenderness, and talent, can inscribe upon pages sent by themselves into every audience of society, as it may happen, sentiments which they would not dare to express before a drawing-room company or a closet friend. Sentiments which the Poet would himself blush to utter in the presence of a woman, and which if he heard another express to her he would probably resort to personal violence to repel and punish. Yet these are the impurities which

he stamps indelibly upon his paper, sending it into circles the most innocent and refined, to his own shame and condemnation. If the Poetry thus tarnished possess other qualities sufficient to invest it with popularity, how earnestly would the dying Poet exchange the immortality of his verse for the extinction which might bury his ever-accusing celebrity in the grave which is soon to enclose himself.

There is another consideration which the Poet ought to keep in view in the compositions which, once sent forth into the world, are ever after beyond the power of their originator. More perhaps than any other species of literature does Poetry stamp the degree of refinement enjoyed by its own age, inasmuch as sentiments of a coarse and gross character must indeed be current when the virgin robe of the Muse is worn in soils and stains, and her pure lips made to utter coarse and ribald jests.

Looking back, and tracing through successive ages the majestic march of the Poets up to our own time, we are proud to see that

their tide of song has gone on not only purifying itself, but refining every grade of society. Whatever may be the vices of the nineteenth century, they have none of the shamelessness of previous periods. Society has now the grace to blush for its own sins, and does not parade them like merits, and give them currency through the medium of a fascinating metre, the music of which, resting on the ear, fastens the immorality on the heart. How many an infamous sentiment has been impressed upon the thoughts, to the vitiation of all the better feelings, by means of some catching cadence, which in hours of sickness and devotion those haunted by the evil spirit would give more than they can measure to forget. Unhappily, oblivion is not in their own power, and on the Poet rests the sin of bringing up the accursed ministers of another world to afflict us with their presence, instead of the bright, the glorious, the blessed, and the beautiful, who might be ever ready benignly to point us to their own native skies.

There are many rocks in the great ocean

of literature; and having thus spoken of the one which involves the highest responsibility of the Poet, we proceed to others, which are often fatal to success and reputation, and which to remember may be to avoid.

Poetry should never outrage probability; that is, the probability of the age in which it is written. A Poet who should at this day make the events he describes depend on enchantment would probably find a very limited degree of attention, yet when Shakespeare wrote, the existence of witches was not only believed, but made the subject of legal enactments. Popular opinions, however, which were once received though since exploded, may still be pleasing, because we all remember to have listened to them in our childhood, and can never thoroughly divest ourselves of such agreeable recollections.

If we may use the Painter's technical phrase, there should always be true *keeping* in the labours of the Poet. If he venture to create his own world, he must throw himself into it. He must not stand like a necro-

mancer on its verge, and point with his wand to the stars of his hemisphere. He will be no enchanter, but a mere showman, if he thus present himself distinct from his own dream-land. To carry us with him, he must cast himself into the midst of his own magic circle. If he choose to fashion an ideal world, there must be harmony in all its parts. If he disport with the gnomes and the fairies, he must be careful not to show the human foot, since the scent of flesh and blood at once dispels the charm. There must be no incongruities, no mixture of elements that cannot be made to amalgamate. It is only on these conditions that we surrender ourselves to the charm of the purely ideal. Leaving the material world, we follow, not the footsteps, that would be too corporeal, but the flight of the Poet through the air, the invisible gases combining again as we pass, and so cutting off our connexion with the lower world. But if our guide suddenly remember that he is of the earth and earthy, the faith that buoyed us up is demolished,

and instead of walking safely on the peaks of clouds, or along the milky way, we are precipitated back again to this mundane framework, feeling that we had been lured into some perilous attempt against our human constitutions, and that our celestial guide was no better than a mortal, like ourselves.

But keeping closely to our mother Nature, we have no such peril. Holding fast by her, the Poet is sure of universal sympathy. The thoughts and feelings of the great human family are of one common stock. Manners may change as time advances, but the passions are identical through every age, differing only in intensity. The mind takes in fresh objects of ambition: the heart can never be made cognizant of a new species of affection.

This truth is an anchor-sheet to the Poet. Following nature closely, he is assured of sympathy. There is a spring-time in every heart, which being itself an exquisite species of unwritten Poetry, makes the young especially open to correspondent impressions. Those

who are thus new to life find enjoyment in the mere awakening of their own imaginations. As men advance in their onward journey, the judgment mounts its seat of hearing, and must also receive its satisfaction. But let the Poet firmly keep hold upon the mantle of Nature, and he may confidently trust that every verdict will be in his favour, to the certain establishment of a lasting reputation.

Nevertheless, it would seem that something more pleasing than real nature may sometimes be devised by human fancy; and this is the Poet's business. The possibility of thus improving upon Nature must be obvious to every one. When we look at a landscape, we can fancy a thousand embellishments. Rivers more copious, more limpid, and more beautifully winding. Smoother and wider lawns more richly diversified, caverns and rocks more gloomy and stupendous, rivers more majestic, buildings more magnificent, oceans more varied with islands, more splendid with shipping, or more agitated by

storms than any we have ever seen, it is easy for human imagination to conceive. Many things in art and nature exceed expectation, but nothing can transcend or equal the capacity of thought; and thought in its highest exercise is the element of Poetry.

But thought chooses for itself different fields of observation, and hence arises the different orders of the Poet. One delights in painting nature, dwelling with ecstasy upon the *actual*, catching the golden sunbeams, gathering the dew-drops, treasuring the purple hues of evening, tracing the outlines of the distant mountains as they melt into the ether, copying the enamel of the flowers, singing the songs of the birds, spreading the chaste floods of the moonlight over the landscape, casting the deep, mysterious shadows of the hills across the valleys, catching the liquid silver of the streamlet or the lake. Another leaves earth below, as partaking of the defects of all sublunary nature, and soaring into the heights of the *ideal*, abandons himself to the currents of the imagination, resigning the

sympathies of the many for the suffrages of the few who may be enabled to follow him in his lofty aspirations. Thus the genius of one man leads him to paint the daisy—

“Wee, modest, crimson-tipped flower ;”

while that of another wings him to a flight among the “shining train” of the stars.

The minds of Poets being thus differently constituted, the most important and the first point to which an answer should be obtained is this: “To what particular field does the genius of the individual point when he devotes himself to an Art which is the nearest approach to the divine that earth can show?”

Sometimes an impulse which seems all but irresistible decides this for him: when that is the case, let him yield to his own bent. But let him be sure that this is the case. The Poet’s mind may have its destiny; but let him be sure that it is written among the stars before he abandons himself to its control, otherwise the fatalism may lead him to the splitting upon some rock.

The particular bent which a Poet takes is often the result of a habit, which he could scarcely define how he had formed, but which may have the result of mannerising and restraining his best efforts, and so leading them into channels worn by artificial means, rather than by the force of the natural current.

Let the Poet beware of casting his own mind into any mould. Even if he fill its proportions, he comes out but as one of a thousand imitations; while the chances are, that flaws, and cracks, and sediments render his work worthless even on its own low claims.

It is an undoubted truth, that nature forms the Poet. There are certain refinements of mind, certain acute sensibilities, certain rapturous appreciations of the beauties of the visible world, certain conceptions of the ideal, certain cravings of the heart, certain longings of the soul, which, shaping themselves into verbal expression, make the Poet stand confessed. We need hardly say that these are qualities which no teaching can impart, no study acquire.

Stirred by promptings such as these, the Poet should take his pen and abandon himself fearlessly to the current of his own impulses. Let him not pause to polish, lest he lose the vigour of his original conception. Suffer the rush to have its way, even though it come rough and rugged, and fraught with superfluous material. The gold-digger must not stay to pick out his precious metal by the grain. Taking the sand, he may have the nuggets also: washing away the dross is an after process.

Let the Poet write fearlessly, but having done so, let him polish carefully. While in our apprehension that the native energy of original thought may be blunted down by a timid jealousy impeding its expression, we cannot, on the other hand, too strongly insist upon the most watchful care in the revision of every verse.

Having thus yielded to the impulses of his own mind, let the Poet lay aside his early efforts for a little season. Let him go on adding to their number or length as often as the

prompting of his spirit comes upon him, but let him refrain from their continual reperusal. The author who keeps his own mind familiar with his own productions renders himself incapable of a just appreciation of their merits. The fault which has escaped detection once will probably escape it always, through the mere blindness which custom fastens on the observation. But let him return fresh to his own works after they have been locked up for a few months, and he will find himself much more capable of the great task of criticism. The impulses which blinded his judgment in the heat of composition will have passed away, and he may thus come to his important task calm in mind and clear from prejudice.

The choice of subject has the highest influence on the success of the Poet with the world. To be popular in his own day, he and the world must feel a congenial interest in the subject which he treats. The existing tone of the public mind deserves consideration. If it be running in certain powerful

currents, it is in vain that the Poet spread his sail another way. Doing this, some of our greatest men have missed the due reward of their labours. They have not written for their own day, and their own day has not regarded them. Posterity may do them justice, but the inheritance is for their children, not for themselves, and unrequited talent, meantime, has its pangs beyond the power of ordinary minds to know.

It is necessary for the Poet to understand his powers that he may apply them to their best advantage. Something also is required in the reader. The public mind should be attuned to the subject of the Poet's verse. The feeling between the parties should correspond. This observation, however, is offered in a modified sense. Some phases of feeling in society are evanescent; mere ebullitions of the day, impulses elicited by passing events, soon to give place to others equally contingent and capricious. If a Poet identify himself with these, the chances are that he must die with his generation. Hudibras is an

exception, but most of his allusions are buried in the graves of those against whom the arrows of his wit were aimed.

The age in which a Poet lives has doubtless an influence on his spirit, and gives a colour to the productions of his pen. Genius itself may be national. Patriotism and Poetry may have a close relationship. He who writes for his own day may be as truly of the Poets as he who pleads for fame at the "bar of posterity." Some influence of intense interest in the *present* may alienate his anticipations from the *future*. It would be unfair to say that he sells his birthright; on the contrary, he takes immediate possession of all the inheritance to which he is enabled to substantiate his claim.

Again, there are certain eras in society, in which peculiar atmospheres of thought and feeling prevade its masses, and cast one general hue over every emanation. Engrossing predilections fasten themselves upon the world, and mind follows mind with the irresistible regularity of a dominant fashion. An

instinctive obedience to prevailing impressions enslaves the spirit even of the Poet, but if he suffers himself to be enrolled in regiments such as these, he subscribes to an act of uniformity which must for ever keep him in the ranks. •

There is danger in following any fashion in the different forms and styles of Poetry. We may take warning when we look upon the productions of the sister art of Painting, and see the grotesque images which even a Lawrence has left upon his living canvas. The graceful life which he has thrown upon it renders only more apparent the infinite disparity between his talents in Portraiture and their accompaniments, consisting of the fashions of his day, which overload many of his Pictures, like so many blots on their beauty. Of course Lawrence was not alone in this artistic misfortune, but we mention him the more particularly, because he chanced to suffer from the ill effects of a peculiarly monstrous phase in the modes which were then prevailing. ✚

The Poet ought to beware of any addiction to the fashions of his own day, fashions, we mean, of style, of phraseology, of conventionalism of every sort, for two great reasons. The first, because every fashion passes away into its own grave, after its mere day of dominancy, as certainly as the ephemeral insects which glitter in the sunlight for their own brief hour; the second, because fashion is and must ever be fatal to originality.

Even when a Poet is clear from the meretricious influences of any prevailing fancy of his own day, he must still be upon his guard not to suffer his mind to follow the minds of others in beaten tracks. Doing this he may undoubtedly become a sweet and feeling Poet, because many a legitimate road has been thus marked out by those who have done very worthily. Nevertheless, he must abandon the highest ambition of all—originality. Many a mountain rill glides sunkissed and cheerily through long-worn channels, into the smiling valleys below, but the flight of the bird is high and free; his heaven is pathless, and

as he takes his way where none have gone before so the very air closes after him, and none may follow.

A Poet's subject should not be so much a choice as an impulse. At the very least he should have a strong bias towards some peculiar theme. He may reflect upon it, but his inclination should know no fluctuation.

Let us not be misunderstood, we are not meaning to assert that lofty themes alone belong to the true Poet. The grand, the sublime, and the majestic are undoubtedly his legitimate possessions; but it is a part of his high prerogative to throw the decisive halo of genius on themes of comparative humility. When we warn him of the danger of walking in beaten tracks, we are far from implying that even the most familiar subjects are interdicted to him. We only wish to put him on his guard, lest in adopting the same topics, he may instinctively abandon himself to the same pathways, falling unconsciously into similar trains of thought, and so sink into the mere verse-maker.

The case is altogether different when there is that amount of vigorous originality in the Poet's own mind which may enable him to snatch a familiar thing from the ordinary detail of human life, and lighting it up with the fervour of his own genius, reproduce it in his works, invested with an originality which seems to have changed its very nature. Such triumphs as these are indeed worthy of the Poet, and many of those who have enjoyed the highest reputations have thus taken the world by surprise.

Certain classes of subjects there are which seem to court the Poet, as associated with human sympathies in all places and all generations. The moment these are touched upon, the heart opens to the unfailing instinct. Patriotism is eminently one of these. The passion, for so we may well call it, is all but universal. Love of country is altogether so unselfish, that men are proud even of its excess. Its absence is a defect: its presence a merit. Attachment to a home, a birth-place, exemplifies the same feeling on a

narrower scale, but of power proportionately condensed. The affections which stir within the heart when the voice of song enters into its recesses are still more potent.

When the Poet identifies himself with these emanations of our humanity, he throws himself at once into the current of our unchanging sympathies, and sails safely with the tide. Other topics there are in which both wind and current are against him, and he must owe his victory to the force and fire of his own genius.

Poets there have been of master minds, who have disdained to float down the stream of time borne up on existing sympathies. They have resolved to create for themselves that condition of the public mind which should welcome them with its acceptance, and not to profit from that atmosphere of feeling available to all. This is a hazardous experiment. It is one of the speculations which success alone can justify. Anticipations are untenable. Fame and reputation are thrown on the cast of the die. It is impossible to

determine whether the ardour of the Poet turns on rash hardihood or the courage of noble minds. Possessed by one all engrossing idea, he has either the faith or the presumption to believe that all things are possible to his endeavours. It would be useless to dissuade the mind, worked up to this degree of enthusiasm, to abandon its own purposes. If the determination be a permanent one, it is better that the experiment should be made. There may be a multitude of failures, but there may also be one glorious exception that will prove worth them all. The monuments of Poetic genius which we possess convince us that the Art is not always an inductive one. The instantaneous combustion of the elements of thought and feeling send their electric fire across the sky without premeditation; and thus it is that they may be said to create the atmosphere most congenial to their own appreciation.

A great ambition not unfrequently acts upon an excitable temperament—and Poets are all excitable—stimulating to attempts of

this dangerous nature, when fields of graceful produce lie ready for the sickle, all smiling around the Poet's feet. These are his heaven-given heritage, his own by right of birth, and from these he may gather produce to his utmost desire, and to the abiding honour of his own name and reputation. Let him look well before he takes his flight to the stars. If it be but a leap, he must fall; and the greater height he has attained the more injurious will be his precipitation back to earth.

We offer advice, however, without presuming on dictation. The Poet's choice of themes and thoughts must remain his own, or there will be no unction in his verse. Of all free men he must be most free. His mind must be entirely his own, his spirit must take its unfettered flight wherever its impulses determine. Men who have attained the highest reputations when their song has been spontaneous, have fallen into mediocrity at once when they have written on compulsion. Witness the Laureates. We want no proof of the divinity of genius; if we did, we should

find it in the entire impossibility of all attempts to subjugate the spirit of the Poet.

The mind of the Poet should be fused, as it were, into his own subject; they should be identical. The reader ought not to be able to recognise a separate existence, handling, ordering, and dictating the various parts, but that oneness which should carry with it the impression that the Poet was not so much inditing Poetry as breathing out his soul within him in the shape of verse.

In offering these suggestions, let it be well understood, that far from seeking to quench the spirit of the Poet, we would aim to fan it into those genial flames which may best enlighten and warm the earth, since it has been for the promotion of the highest and purest purposes that the divine gift has been bestowed on man. To silence the true Poet would be an utter impossibility. The fire within must have vent. His spirit pants for utterance, and if he only speak to the winds, he must do it in their audience. If for a season some cold maxim of prudence, some biting

sarcasm, some ungenerous criticism, induce the determination of keeping the gushes of his thoughts and feelings pent up within himself, what more than mortal agony does he not endure, and all in vain; for as certainly as the true springs of song have their fountain head within him, so surely will they burst forth, whatever be his determination to the contrary.

It is well for the world that its highest impulses have been placed beyond its own control. Poetry has existed, and will continue to exist, through every age of our life on earth. It is bound up in every affection of the heart. It brightens anticipations and soothes reflections. It is hope for the young, and memory for the old; hope and memory being themselves the sun and the shadow of our whole career.

It has been justly observed, that everything in nature is complex, and bears innumerable relations to other things, and may therefore be viewed in an endless variety of lights, and consequently described in an endless variety of ways. Some descriptions may be good, and

others not so. An historical description, that enumerates all the qualities of any object is good, because it is true, but may be as un-affecting as a logical definition. In Poetry no un-affecting description is good, however conformable to truth; for here we expect not a complete enumeration of qualities, but only such an enumeration as may give a lively and interesting idea. It is not memory or the knowledge of rules that can qualify a Poet for this sort of description, but a peculiar liveliness of fancy and sensibility of heart, the nature whereof we may explain by its effects, but for the attainment of which we cannot lay down any rules.

There is also much in the period of life when Poetry is written. Youth is proverbially the era of Poetry, and an indulgence in it at that period, if rightly directed, often gives to the character a beneficial direction, for who does not wish to record and give permanence to their earliest and strongest feelings and impressions, so that they may return to them in after life, finding in them a

retrospect full of deep and often of strange and mysterious sentiment.

The ambition to become a Poet is one of the most elevated that can animate the human breast. Each new one worthy of the name adds a star to the highest heaven of our Literature. A Country may, indeed, well be proud of her Bards, for their influence on life is greater than that of either the Moralist or Legislator. Reasoning may convince an unwilling mind; Poetry carries the willing heart.

Poetry may truthfully be called the Aurora of youth. In the beginning of life, and while experience is confined to a small circle, we admire everything. A Peasant thinks the Hall of his Landlord the finest apartment in the universe, listens with rapture to the strolling Ballad singer, and wonders at the rich woodcut that adorns his ruder composition. A Child looks upon his native Village as a Town, upon the brook that runs by as a river, and upon the meadows and hills in the neighbourhood as the most spacious and

beautiful that the world can produce. But after long absence, when he returns in his declining years to visit once before he die the dear spot that gave him birth, and those scenes whereof he remembers rather the original charm than the exact proportion, how is he disappointed to find every thing so debased and so diminished. The Hills seem to have sunk into the ground, the Brook to have dried up, and the Village to be forsaken of its people. The Parish Church, stripped of all its fancied magnificence, is become low, gloomy, and narrow, and the fields are now only the miniature of what they were. Had he never left the spot, his notions might have remained the same as at first, and had he travelled but a little way from it they would not perhaps have received any material enlargement. But he has witnessed other scenes, of which in early life he knew nothing, and hence arises the zest with which Poetical descriptions of such recollections are brought back to his memory.

It is thus that Poetry restores to us the

pleasures of our youth, lost to us in every other way. In one respect, however, there exists a material difference. We value them but little while in our possession, yet in our retrospections, the tenderness of memory and the fondness of regret seem to augment their worth the further they recede from our view. The ignorance of his youth is sweeter even to the Philosopher than all the wisdom of his age.

We need scarcely wonder that this should be so. The instincts of the heart are freshest when they are nearest their source ; and Poetry is the expression of these instincts.

Without Poetry the world would be a barren wilderness. Its softening influences spread into all the privacies of life. Without it society would grow hard and unfeeling. Its spirit is full of benign, ennobling, purifying power. We are bold to say, that Poetry forms that essential element of our nature, without which the world must become little better than a dreary desert.

We are warranted in the expression of this

opinion from the fact, that Poetry is in its highest character the legitimate minister of religion. Everywhere throughout the pages of Revelation, the most sublime truths are conveyed to us through its medium. If we would look for the loftiest and finest specimens of the capabilities of Poetry, we must turn at once to the inspired word.

But the range of Poetry, while it ascends to the highest, takes in the most minute atom of our creation. From the magnificent epic to the baby's lullaby, it exalts itself or condescends with equal fitness. Wherever creation spreads, or life is breathed, there its spirit permeates.

It becomes, then, an object of the last importance, not only to the individual Poet for the sake of his own reputation and his influence on society, but for the interests of the world at large, which is to a great degree ruled by its literature, that all such aids and hints as may be useful to him in the guidance of his verse, should be placed before him in some condensed form, so that at least

he may accept them or reject them at one view.

In the humble hope that some of our suggestions might prove useful, has the present little work been undertaken. If it should save one true Poet from shipwreck, or warn away but a few others from striking on the rocks of Criticism, so fatal to that acute sensibility which is as nature to his race, the Author will not have written in vain.

When it is reflected that the impulses which carry Poets into verse as the expression of their feelings are precisely those which hurry them past the restrictions of their own judgment, and that these impulses are invariably the strongest in youth, while experience lies in the future twilight of life, we shall wonder the less that the most fruitful minds fall into the most dangerous eccentricities, and perhaps see the necessity of some faithful and dispassionate adviser. How many a gifted Poet, who has gone to his grave stricken with the fatal malady of disappointment, might have lived long to the fair

enjoyment of his own bright gift for the uncurtailed length of his natural life, and left an undying reputation after him, had he but taken counsel with some faithful and honest friend !

Desiring, as far as our abilities permit, to fill this office, we shall proceed to offer a few hints and warnings.

The human mind is capable of great diversity in its development. Sometimes the faculties open at one burst : at others they are of gradual progression, until the intellect attains the zenith of its powers. It often happens that a Poet produces his best work first, simply because some strong impulse impels him into the fullest exercise of his own energies, and his spirit has already climbed its meridian heaven. In others, the germs of thought require time to expand and fructify. Both are conscious of the life stirring within them. Let the one write fearlessly, but let him prune carefully. There is danger in his very luxuriance. Having done so, let him enjoy his chaplet of early blos-

soms. Let the other patiently develop the veins of precious metal which he is conscious lie within him. His crown may be the ever-green, though it be assumed later in the more ripened period of his existence.

One imperative necessity lies upon the Poet at the very outset of his labours. It is to propose to himself a subject worthy of his own powers, suitable to the qualities of his own intellect, interesting to his feelings, and, as far as may be, likely to prove congenial to the existing sentiments of his own day, so that he may be assisted by the congeniality of those external conditions which throw their reflection back upon the mirror of his own mind.

No Poet can excel or even write up to the level of his own powers, if his subject be not the full, the free, the fresh, choice of his own will, and if he do not pursue it at his own pleasure. Tasks that are set to the mind can at best be but mechanically performed. We believe that the whole army of the Poets could not do otherwise than stand opposed to

Dr. Johnson, when he talks about the mind being under the control of the will. The spirit of song is not a thing to hold up its head when it is bidden, and march at any given word of command. That sensibility which is at once the Poet's gift and the Poet's misery, droops under every shadow which flits across its heaven, and if it be commanded to smile, is much more likely to sigh. The Poet should be most careful not to attempt to write when his feelings are against him. Let him wait until a happier phase of his spirit come. As certainly as he is depressed at one time, he will be inspirited at another. Let an Author compare the different qualities of his productions. That which was written when the bright glow of thought was strong upon him, will go straight to the heart, and fire it with a correspondent energy; that which was composed upon compulsion may be faultless, but it will be the faultlessness of uniformity; flat and dull indeed are all imitations of feeling.

Our convictions on this part of our subject

are so strong, that we are almost led to assert that where uniformity presides over a work, the genuine soul of true Poetic power is absent. There are many cultivated minds able to model forms of undeniable beauty, but if the spirit be wanting, that spirit which alone can prove these graceful creations to be of divine birth, we are constrained to say that they come from the skill of the machinist, and know nothing of celestial descent.

A certain ruggedness of style may, when it is suitable to its subject, give force and vigour to what it delineates. Nature, reality, vitality, the moving energies of the passions, these are not always best conveyed in silken phrases and polished modulations. Fine ladyism sits ill upon the Muses.

Yet let the Poet beware of assuming a ruggedness which is not his own. We admire the jutting rocks over which the cataract falls, broken by their angles into sparkling passions scattering diamonds as they precipitate themselves in wild confusion down into the

valleys; but we deprecate the rough stones in the highway over which we are compelled to travel, as painful and jarring obstructions.

Affectation, however, is like the wrappings of the invalid in the sick chamber. Poetry cannot breathe in that close atmosphere, the taints of earth, disease, imprisonment, decay, are as poisonous exhalations to the heaven-born spirit, which finds its most congenial atmosphere in the pure mountain air which rides on the wings of the whirlwind, and floats on the foam of the ocean.

Whatever the external adornment or mode of presentation, let a Poet take the most scrupulous care that the forms which he thus presents to the world shall be perfect in all their parts. The artist who paints the person of a sovereign loaded with the heavy trappings of his royalty, must, under that cumbrous guise, as thoroughly embody the human figure, with all its limbs and muscles, as if he were delineating an Apollo, otherwise his picture will be but the monarch's garments hung upon pegs. In the same

way, let the Poet take heed that his tropes and figures are the truthful robings of some muscular form beneath; and if we find the throbs of his vitality agitating the drapery, we have at once the proof that there is life within.

Not only should there be life in the stirrings of the Poet's thoughts, but there should be healthy life. Its effect upon the world ought to be energizing, stimulating to higher purposes, more noble pursuits. The tossings of fitful fever, or maniacal ravings, are things which we are called upon to struggle against, and not to sympathize with. Poetry defeats itself if it compels us to take up the arms of rebellion against its high prerogative.

Thus matter and manner ought to have a strict relation to each other. The nature of a theme invests its treatment with something of its own powers, and the source colours the flow of thought diverging from it in a thousand rippling streams. Perhaps it may not be inapt to say that some of the Poets have day-dreams, while others have only night-

mares. The first are the dilations of the free spirit; the last the writhings of its oppression.

The legitimate field of Poetry, the true spirit-world, is large enough for the most ambitious. It comprises all that is loveable in domestic life, all that is magnificent in nature, all that is sublime in thought, all that is elevating in religion.

Language is the chariot of thought from one mind to another. The Poet should be careful that the conveyance is worthy of its freight, although there is the opposite danger of a splendid equipage with emptiness, or even corruption, within. Nevertheless, thoughts often struggle into words having meanings far beyond them, which no power of expression can adequately convey.

There is one distinction which we would strongly mark. The true Poet is not always the great one. The company of the bards is not a regiment of picked men. They are of different statures and varying proportions. Let each individual cultivate the gift which has bestowed.

It is well for the Poet to try his powers and probe his own capabilities. He cannot measure himself, because he will go on expanding and improving. Nevertheless, if he arrive at some approximation to the truth, it is no disadvantage to know that the strength which suffices for the outset of his journey will augment rather than decline, as he advances on his way.

The Poet must not suffer himself to be too discursive. From the starting-point he must keep his goal distinctly in view. Let him beware of wandering too far.

Some minds are strongly acted upon by surrounding associations. This liability is dangerous, if not fatal, to originality of thought. Let the Poet watch himself narrowly in this particular.

This liability of one mind to sympathize with another, and so follow on its track, strongly influences the course of all literature. Hence the phases of its fashions. Hence its proneness to be classical instead of natural—dealing with dead forms rather than breath-

ing life. Hence the danger of imitation. Hence the still greater danger of apparent plagiarism, the mind becoming invested with certain images which it is constantly reproducing.

There is another semblance of plagiarism, which, although not so in truth, is frequently mistaken for the reality. Many of the finest thoughts of the Poet are elicited by some spark of combustion from another mind firing the train of his own imagination. This is not plagiarism. It is the suggestive influence which sets the mind in motion. An energetic intellect takes up the ideas thus presented to it, and carries them on with a resistlessness almost beyond the curb of its own control. It is difficult to guard against this peril. We can only point it out as an object of attention.

One general rule may be worthy of remembrance. Let the Poet write from the heart rather than from the memory. It is dangerous to have the works of others too strongly impressed upon the mind. It is

better to paint from nature than from the finest models. Our sympathies are not with the deities of Mount Olympus; they are with the beings of flesh and blood, who tread our streets and till our fields. Drawing from nature, the Poet fits all time.

A Poet of redundant imagination must be careful not to overload his subject with adornment, since, in doing so, he may distract attention from its primary interest. The course of a narrative should be kept visibly before the mind. A traveller is not recompensed for losing his way simply because his path is covered with flowers.

Poetry ought always to be suggestive. It is not enough that it should charm the heart for an hour or a day. It should send the mind of its readers out on their own great journey. It should give impulse to thought, impetus to inclination: it should energize every faculty, and so speed the parting guest after it has accompanied him to the last landmark of its own limits.

The faculties of the Poet are of varied charac-

ter, as well as of different degrees. Sometimes we recognise the capacity to conceive without the power to execute; sometimes fine finish lavished on inadequate perceptions. He who would improve, should scrutinize himself, that he may discover his own deficiencies, and, having done so, direct his efforts to the particular line of remedy.

Reflection alone will not make Poetry. It is not to be found in rations of thought given out from the best stored magazines. Sunbeams are not to be dug out of the earth.

Nevertheless, let not the Poet trust exclusively to inspiration. Although his impulses are not to be restrained, he ought carefully to train, to purify, to elevate them in every available way. On the other hand, he must not suffer severity of judgment to clog his fancy. Let him write freely, the more freely the better; but on the condition that he revise carefully. Art must not be suffered to stifle Nature. Let her be the handmaid always, never the mistress.

Design is necessary to action. Without it

the most active and strongest energies are wasted, wanting a purpose. The Poet too often dissipates his strength in dreams. Watching the course of the clouds sailing across the sky at sunset is not gathering in the harvest which that sun has ripened.

The Poet should always write for a purpose, and not waste his thoughts on some bright chimera, some beautiful fragment of the ideal, which may shine like a diamond splinter, but must be set for use and preservation. He requires a plan on which he may pour out the fulness of his mind and imagination. The bent of the one and the power of the other are alike manifested in the choice which he may make. Some Poets prove themselves capable of forming a noble and worthy design, sometimes to the impoverishment of their own power of carrying it out, or at least not accompanied by correspondent qualities for its accomplishment ; while others have a capacity for detail and illustration without the ability of rearing a framework worthy of such adornment.

The amount of action involved in the progress of a Poem ought to be most carefully considered. Too much incident is destructive to imaginative illustration. The mind is hurried on, like a hasty traveller, who is not allowed sufficient time to admire the beauties of the scenes through which he is passing. On the other hand, there is a danger of over reflectiveness and superabundant illustration, needing the due course of an action which may carry them on in a current of interest to which they lend grace and development in a thousand varied forms. Be it ever remembered that action and treatment are mutually dependent on each other for advantages reciprocally imparted.

Concentration and diffuseness are also dangers to the Poet equally to be avoided. The one verges on dry enumeration; the other is a drop of essence lost in a large dilution. The middle course alone can be the true one. Nevertheless, proportion belongs in some degree to the class of subject matter.

A Poet should not merely paint external

aspects: he must not content himself with delineating in words, however accurately. If he cannot throw himself into that inner heart which is the life of all he would reproduce, he is unfitted for his task. If he can enter into the spirit of that which has given birth to the action which he delineates, he may fearlessly reckon on the sympathies of the world.

Yet let it be remembered that the sympathies of the few, and the sympathies of the multitude, respond to the touch of the Poet in proportion to the exclusiveness or the universality of the feeling to which he appeals. Minds of most elevated order have missed their popularity, because they have written above the general standard of the people, but they are understood by the knot of kindred spirits whose praise is dearer to them than a wide-spread fame; others appeal to the human heart at large, and because certain affections of the heart are common to our humanity, the response is wide and deep, which at once attests their celebrity.

There are some conditions of life with which it is comparatively easy for the Poet to associate himself, so producing their impression on the mind. Remembrance of the woes of existence, the sorrows we have endured, the trials we have passed through, are re-awakened by the slightest allusions, and those revived sorrows stand as trophies of the Poet's powers. These are easy triumphs. It is more difficult to revive the remembrances of joy, because these have been less frequent and have made slighter impressions on our ungrateful hearts; and because the memory of departed pleasures turns into sorrow for their loss. Nevertheless, there is more music in the ringing of the joy-bells of life than in their tolling for death.

The Poet should beware of writing with too much ease. Occasionally it may be the happy flow of his thoughts, but habitually it may cause his verse to degenerate. There is something in the lulling music of the ready versification dangerous to energy of thought.

The Poet's mind must not go with the

stream; on the contrary, his mind must make the stream to carry others down by the force of its own impulse.

Poetry has its own Memory, it is a Memory of the Heart. It is amazing how some snatch of song, heard, perhaps, in childhood, casually, sometimes we scarcely know when or how, clings to us through life. It may fasten a delusion or a superstition on the mind; it may seal it with the impress of some holy truth.

So vast is the influence of the Poet on the world that he cannot do too much to fit himself for his great responsibility. Poetry will exist as long as the world remains an integral part of the Creation. Utilitarians might as well seek to extinguish the stars as trample out its fire. The world would be a mental and a moral wilderness wanting the inspired song to hymn the great Author of its mysteries.

So far then from seeking to check the outpouring of the Poet's soul, our hope is that we may be suffered to minister to him in the way of usefulness. The exaltation of mind which is a part of his constitution carries him above

the sober and prudential detail of advice, which the less gifted but more practical may be privileged to offer. How many a true Poet has carried a heart burdened with its own imprisoned fulness to his very grave, because his first work has been his last. And why should the true Poet's first work be his last? Simply, because he has split upon some rock, visible enough to every ordinary bystander, but overlooked by him whose strength of vision enabled him to gaze upward at the meridian sun.

THE END.

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